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Genres at home and at school: Bridging the known to the new

Being aware of genres young children encounter at home and at school offers opportunities to bridge home and school literacies and enhance children's literacy development.

James sits on the couch in his living room watching his brother study directions for assembling a bell for his bike. On the coffee table sits the mail that has just come, this week's *TV Guide*, and yesterday's newspaper. James's mother stands by the kitchen door preparing for a trip to the grocery store, list and coupons in hand. His older sister thumbs through her appointment book considering events of the week; his younger sister looks intently at pages of her new picture book.

At school James sits with his classmates on the rug as the teacher reads the attendance list. James looks up at the bulletin board where a calendar and the week's poems are written on chart paper. The chalkboard lists today's assigned workbook pages and the day's schedule. Two friends sit nearby flipping through the book the teacher has put out for read-aloud. James thinks about what he might write during journal time.

These two brief moments in time illustrate that James, like many children, encounters many different kinds of text in his daily life. All around him, at home and at school, there are many different kinds of written language used for many different reasons. Some are similar, such as the grocery list and the list of workbook pages to complete; others are different, such as the television guide at home and the rhyming poem at school.

This article reports on genres found at home and at school for two groups of young children from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. We identify genres commonly found in

both settings, as well as those typically found only in one setting or the other. We suggest ways that being aware of genres young children encounter at home and at school offer opportunities to bridge home and school literacies and enhance children's literacy development.

Rationale for the project

Children learn about literacy at home as well as at school. Over the past two decades, emergent literacy research has revealed that many children come to school with some knowledge of where print is found and what it is for. Some children recognize important words—*Mom*, *love*, their own names—and some know how print works—that we read from left to right, which way a book opens, that letters stand for sounds (Clay, 1993). While knowledge about print at school entry does vary from child to child and from community to community, nearly all children, including those from low-SES settings, have had regular exposure to print in their homes and communities (Teale, 1986) and develop important literacy knowledge because of this (Purcell-Gates, 1996).

Many suggest linking home and school literacies, particularly in early schooling. Many researchers have suggested that mismatches between the nature and uses of literacy at home and at school may be one cause of children's difficulties with literacy in early schooling (e.g., Barton, 1994; Heath, 1983). Some have argued that when schools actively attempt to link children's home and school literacies, students' literacy development is facilitated (e.g., Moll & González, 1994; Neuman &

Roskos, 1992). Conversely, when the curriculum does not deliberately link to home literacies, students may not transfer their literacy knowledge and dispositions across settings.

Genre provides one powerful way to think about literacies. *Genre*, as we define it, refers to patterns in the way language is used; that is, it refers to patterns in the situations in which a text is used and patterns in the features of that text—its language, format, structure, and content. This definition links the function of a text to its features (Freedman & Medway, 1994). Coupons, for example, are used in a fairly narrow type of situation and have particular features, at least in part, because they are used in only that type of situation. The functions and features of text are inextricably linked.

Genre provides a powerful lens to examine literacies to which children are exposed at home and at school. The first two paragraphs of this article illustrate the “multigenres” of many children’s lives. James encounters multiple functions of print and corresponding forms of it daily. Some genres are common in both settings—a picture book, a list, a schedule—whereas others are found in only one of them.

Children develop genre knowledge early. Just as researchers have demonstrated that many children learn about literacy in general at home as well as at school, some research has shown that young children learn about genre specifically at home *and* at school. In research on early oral language development, for example, there is a well-documented phenomenon in which children reflect different genres in their pretend play—the teacher genre, the mommy genre, the doctor genre, and so on (e.g., Ervin-Tripp, 1973). Children spontaneously modulate the features of their language depending on the context in which they (are pretending to) use it.

Research on early written language development also documents attention to genre. Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) reported an instance in which one child they studied, 3-year-old Hannah, scribbled or pretended to write two texts—she identified one as a shopping list and the other as a story. The format of these texts was appropriate to their genres. The shopping list was composed of short scribbles arranged in a single column on only part of the page. The story, on the

other hand, had longer scribbles moving from left to right across most of the page.

In a similar case, the researchers reported that Stephanie, not yet in first grade, created four texts—identified as a birthday list, a letter, a map, and a story page—all within two days. Each text had specific features appropriate to its intended genre, such as the interspersed text and pictures on the map and the delineated text and picture on the story page.

Research on young children’s pretend reading also suggests attention to genre. For example, the second author asked kindergarten-aged children, who had been read aloud to at least five times per week from at least two years prior to kindergarten, to pretend to read a wordless picture book that suggested a fictional, fairy tale narrative (Purcell-Gates, 1988). She found that children produced readings containing many linguistic features of the language of this genre such as a formulaic opening (e.g., *Once upon a time...*) and use of attributive adjectives (e.g., *the beautiful princess*).

The first author examined kindergarten-aged children’s pretend readings of an unfamiliar wordless information book before and after they had been exposed to a substantial number of texts in this genre in class (Duke & Kays, 1998). Children’s readings after exposure reflected greater knowledge of several features characteristic of the information book genre, such as the use of timeless present-tense verb constructions and generic noun structures (e.g., *firefighters fight fires* versus *the firefighter is fighting a fire*). Yet the children’s pretend readings of a narrative text did not show an increase in these features, indicating that the children knew those features were appropriate to one genre but not to the other. This and other studies suggest that children learn about the functions and features of the genres they encounter at home and at school. Children’s understandings of what print is for and how it works are built through their experiences with different genres of written language. This fact points directly to the need to know more about what these genres are and how they compare across settings

The two studies

The project we describe involved comparing data from two different research studies in the

United States. In one study, 20 low-SES families, each with at least one child in the home between the ages of 4 and 6, were observed for one aggregated week. Observers, who were of the same ethnic heritage as the family they observed, spent time with the families in their homes and wherever else the children went. They watched specifically for any events involving written language in which the child participated or was an observer, but they did not reveal this focus to the families. Literacy events that were initiated by the researchers' presence (such as requests to write on a researcher's pad of paper, which were always granted) were not included in the analysis. The observers' notes provide information about the nature and uses of print in these children's daily lives outside of school. (For further information about methods used in this study, see Purcell-Gates, 1996.)

In the second study, 10 first-grade classrooms, all in low-SES settings, were each observed for four full days spread throughout a school year. On classroom visits the observer recorded, among other things, information about each classroom activity during the day that involved print in any way. This included activities in which print was the focus (e.g., during poetry reading) and activities in which it was not (e.g., on a math facts worksheet). The genre of text used during each minute of the activity was recorded. The resulting records provide information about the nature and uses of print observed and experienced by these first-grade children in school. (For further information about methods used in this study, see Duke, 2000a, 2000b.)

These two studies have several important characteristics in common. First, they both took place in low-SES settings (in fact, some of the same low-SES settings) in the Greater Boston metropolitan area in Massachusetts. Second, they both had an explicit focus on the nature and uses of print in these settings. Third, they involved children just before and then during their first-grade year of schooling. These similarities make the studies ripe for comparison of home and school settings.

The two studies also have some notable differences. First, data in both studies were collected with use of different base units of analysis. In the first study (Purcell-Gates, 1996), the base unit of analysis was the *literacy event* and was concerned with the number of literacy events involving a par-

ticular genre. In the second study (Duke, 2000a, 2000b), the base unit of analysis was the *minute*, and the number of minutes spent with a particular genre was counted. The difference in the base units of analysis for these studies is appropriate because the studies were conducted in different settings where different base units of analysis seemed more natural or suitable. However, this difference did make genre comparisons across the two settings challenging. We addressed the challenge by first determining common and less common genres within each setting, using the base unit of analysis for that setting, and then comparing the more and less common genres across settings. In this way, we are able to talk about genres that were commonly used in both settings as well as genres that were commonly used in only one setting or the other.

A second notable difference between the two studies is that the first one was not originally designed to collect data specifically on genre, whereas the second one was. For that reason, data in the first study were reanalyzed for this project. To reanalyze the data, we returned to the original field notes for the study and determined the genre used in each literacy event (using only literacy events that we were fairly certain the 4- to 6-year-old child in the family had observed and that did not involve school-assigned homework). In the vast majority of cases, information sufficient to identify the genre could be gleaned from the field notes. In cases in which it could not, that literacy event was not counted in the analysis.

For the purpose of this project, which is to provide a rough account of the genres used in these homes and classrooms, genre was identified using a "common-knowledge" approach. We simply identified the genres used in the activities based on commonly known categories such as catalog, comic book, cookbook, and coupon in the case of homes and schedule, school lunch menu, and story problem in the case of classrooms. Fine-grained distinctions (e.g., between a comic and a comic book) were made. Depending on whether some of these closely related genre categories are counted separately or together, there were approximately 65 genres identified in the home settings and approximately 55 genres identified in the school settings. (Children's books were counted as one large category due to the lack of more specific delineations in much of the home data; when such books are

FIGURE 1
The 10 most commonly used genres in the homes and schools

Commonly used in homes	Commonly used in both settings	Commonly used in schools
Names	Children's books	Worksheets
Labels	Individual words*	Individual sentences*
Newspaper	Individual letters*	Journals
Game-related print	Lists	Descriptive text
Letters (correspondence)		Charts
Biblical text		Poems

Note.*Not part of any textual genre.

subcategorized, there were many more genres identified in the school settings.)

Genres and settings

The findings of this project are encapsulated in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows the 10 most commonly used genres in each of the settings and indicates the following:

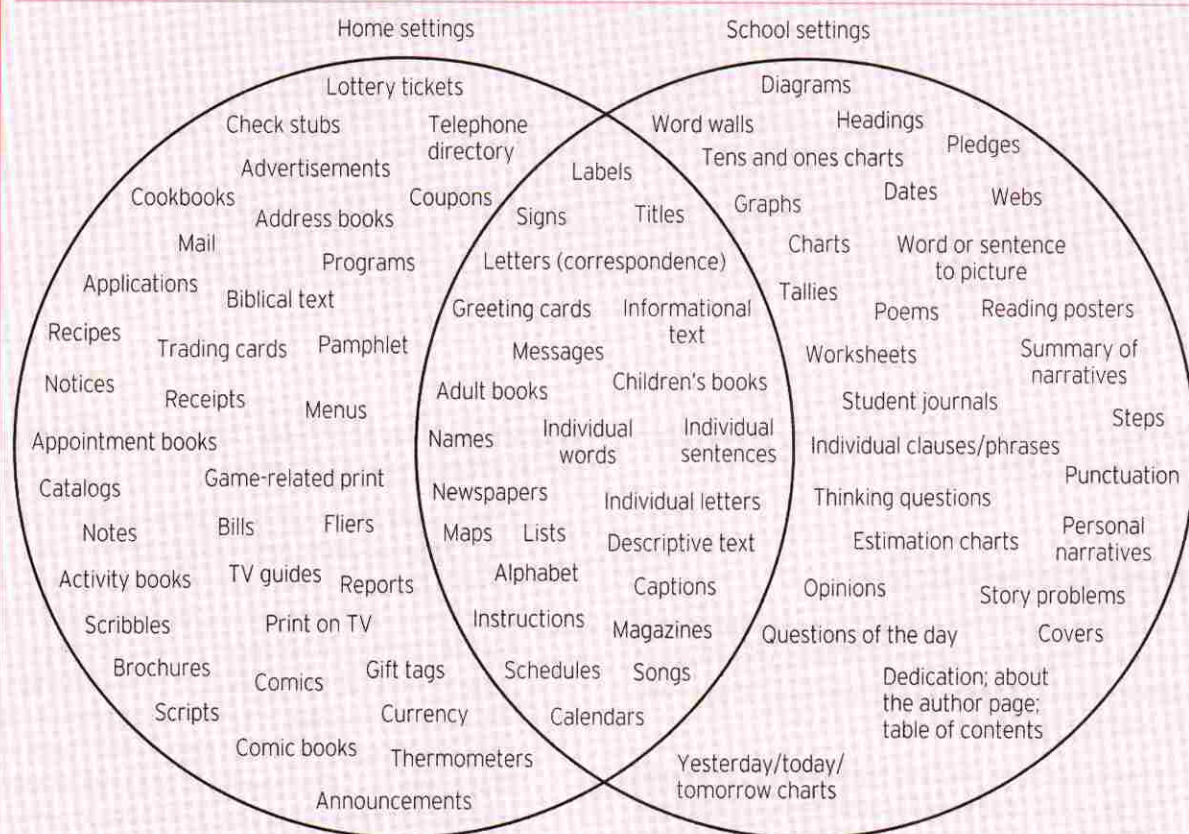
- Some genres, such as children's books and lists, were commonly used in both settings. These genres may already be forging links for these students between home and school literacies and may be particularly well positioned to further forge them.
- Some genres, such as the biblical text and letters (as in correspondence), were commonly used only in the home setting. Children's familiarity with these genres upon entering school may not directly benefit them in knowledge or disposition in school literacy tasks.
- Some genres, including worksheets and journals, were commonly used only in the school setting. Students may be particularly unfamiliar with these genres early in schooling and may require additional assistance to work successfully with them.

Figure 2 shows a larger array of genres found in the two settings. The genres found in only one setting or the other are located only in that setting's circle; the intersecting area of the circles contains

genres found in both settings. Several observations can be made on the basis of this Figure.

- There were fewer genres found in both settings than in only one setting or the other. Furthermore, as shown by the placement of items, the frequency of use of the genres often did not match across settings. So, for example, individual sentences (void of any larger genre context) were very common in the classrooms but fairly rare in the homes. Maps, on the other hand, were commonly read in the homes but not in the classrooms, although again they are found to some degree in both settings.
- With respect to the genres found only in the school setting, many are probably not found in most homes or in settings outside of classrooms. These types of texts have been referred to as "school-only" if their primary purpose is to learn or teach literacy skills in a school context, as compared to those genres that people read and write outside of a formal literacy-learning context (Purcell-Gates, Degener, & Jacobson, 1998; Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002).
- Among the genres found only in the home setting, many, such as comics, trading cards, and game-related print, are primarily for entertainment. Others, such as recipes, mail, and receipts, are part of what has been referred to as "daily living routines," which focus on daily chores and on maintaining a household (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Teale, 1986).

FIGURE 2
Venn diagram of genres used in the homes and schools



Note. Within the overlapping area, placement approximates relative frequency of use in each setting (e.g., newspapers are on the far edge of the overlapping area toward home settings because they were frequently used in the home and only very rarely used in schools).

Genre as one aspect of literacy practice

[T]here are two quite distinct directions in which there can be links between home and school. Firstly, there is whether school practices are reflected in home practices: whether children at home are being prepared for school ways of knowing. Secondly, there is the question of whether home practices are being acknowledged in schools; it is the latter question which is often ignored. (Barton, 1994, p. 185)

Research holds that the construct of literacy practices includes not just the event and the text (genre) but also the culturally based conceptions of the reading and writing process—the cultural

uses and meanings of reading and writing practice (Barton, 1994; Cairney, 1998; Street, 1995). In this project we looked within this construct to examine the texts engaged at home and at school, across cultural contexts. Our focus was on a cognitive component of the culturally constructed practice of literacy. We suggest that genre is one heuristic for thinking about and connecting to home practices in school because research has shown that familiarity and experience with textual forms and features enhance comprehension of printed text.

Our focus on genre alone does not preclude or contradict the need to investigate the mismatch between home and school and the culturally based ways of reading, writing, and valuing involved in the literacy practices of each (Barton, 1994;

Cairney, 1998; Gee, 1992; Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992). Rather, we offer this analysis as a step toward amending home and school mismatches.

There are several ways an awareness of the genres that students experience both at home and at school might enhance children's literacy instruction. The most simple way would be for this awareness to lead teachers to pay particular attention to children's level of understanding of functions and features of genres likely to be new to them. For example, if students are unlikely to have seen charts or poems before, a greater degree of experience and instruction might be provided so that students become familiar with those genres' purposes and conventions.

At the same time, having an awareness of the genres students encounter at school and at home can motivate teachers to include home genres in their school curricula. For example, realizing that pamphlets and brochures are common in many homes but not in many classrooms, teachers might make an effort to incorporate these texts in read-aloud at school. Encountering genres in school that are common in their homes may help children to see the connections between the literacies they observe and participate in at home and what they engage in at school. Theories of learning have accepted for years that children and adults learn more easily when new facts or skills are connected with familiar ones (e.g., Pearson & Johnson, 1978). For children whose home print experiences do not include those genres favored by school literacy instruction, it makes sense to find ways to connect the new with the familiar. Doing this certainly makes more sense than worrying that some children fail to learn as easily as others due to different experiences and then neglecting (or not knowing how) to remedy the situation. As teachers, we must find out what kinds of print are familiar to children and build on those.

Tasks that are conceptually demanding in other ways may be especially good forums for taking advantage of children's familiarity with certain genres. For example, teachers might lead a phonemic awareness lesson using words drawn from the menu of a local restaurant. The concept of exclamation points might be introduced using advertisements from a toy store. Various reading and writing strategies might be demonstrated through letters

written back and forth to another class. When children are more familiar with the functions and features of the genres used, they may have more cognitive "load" available to focus on the new knowledge or skills and may be more convinced of the relevance of doing so.

Teachers who have greater awareness of the genres their students encounter at home might more readily make intertextual connections across home and school. Recent research indicates that even young children can make connections between different texts and that teachers can play a role in encouraging these connections (e.g., Martens, Flurkey, Meyer, & Udell, 1999). Teachers' practices might include such things as relating the poems and songs on chart paper at school to the song lyrics on CD jackets at home or asking students what kinds of directions their families read at home, in preparation for work on reading directions at school.

In essence, teachers can build a cumulative literacy culture in the classroom that draws on each child's home experiences with print while simultaneously expanding the two worlds. Students can certainly help in this building process. For example, each child in a class could be asked to bring in something that people at home read or write regularly, such as cereal boxes, movie or TV guides, game boards, personal letters or cards, journals, and so on. At a designated time during the day, children could take turns presenting their "home artifacts" and sharing with the class the ways in which these items are read or written, who does them, and so on. They could also demonstrate how to read and write these items. Placing such items around the room, perhaps accompanied by dictated teacher- or child-written explanations, would create an evolving literacy culture within classrooms to contextualize the formal literacy instruction of school.

Snapshots of classroom practices

We close with snapshots of some other classroom practices in which children's home genre knowledge is taken into consideration. Neuman and Roskos (1992) described preschool classrooms that had what they called "literacy-enriched" play centers. Each of these centers is modeled after some context familiar to participating children

from their homes and communities, such as a kitchen or office. The centers are enriched with examples of genres appropriate in the settings (e.g., coupons, advertisements, recipes, cookbooks, a telephone book, calendars, and [play] money in a kitchen) as well as blank papers (e.g., a notepad in the kitchen, message pads in the office). Children made extensive use of these examples in the play centers and, when compared to children whose classrooms had not been enriched with such genres, had many more interactions with print during center activities.

One kindergarten teacher engaged children in an activity “making connections between poem print and label print” (Richgels, Poremba, & McGee, 1996, p. 639). The class was group-reading and discussing the poems in *Chicken Soup With Rice: A Book of Months* (Sendak, 1991) and the label on a large can of chicken-with-rice soup. Children related print in one genre to the other, locating the word *chicken* in both contexts. While it is difficult to know for certain, it appears that children benefited from the two genres—one more common at school, the other more common at home—in this phonemic awareness and phonics lesson.

A project in a first-grade classroom involved making and using a class store (Duke & Stewart, 1997). The store incorporated some texts similar in genre to those in a real store, such as price labels, “open” and “closed” signs, and advertisements. Children also had “Spending Journals,” which represented a version of checkbooks more manageable for young children. The teacher linked these journals explicitly to a genre with which many children were familiar, saying such things as “these are like your first checkbook.”

Another first-grade teacher led thematic work early in the school year on signs (Duke, 2000b). Children took photographs of signs in their community, read books such as *I Read Signs* (Hoban, 1983), and used signs in other ways as a basis for literacy activities. Given that many children attend to signs and other environmental print genres in their homes and communities (Roser, 1995), such activities are another way to link home and school literacies. Two other teachers used cooking as a way for students to practice their reading and mathematics skills. Children read recipes, a genre likely to be common in many of their homes, and wrote

their own recipe cards to take home after completing a cooking project.

Rather than decrying the absence of literacy activities or of particular genres in their students’ home settings, all these teachers attempted to build on the literacy strengths and genre knowledge children brought from home. For these teachers, genre proved to be one important means of bridging the known to the new.

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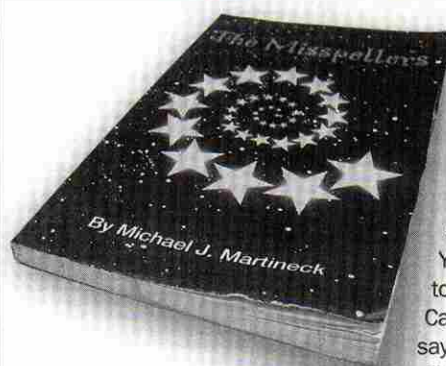
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